

# Abortion clinic refuses to negotiate with girls

As the "right-to-life" groups militate against the right of women to choose abortion, a local abortion clinic appears to be militating against the right of its counselors to stable wages and working conditions. On October 19, after two years of frustrating negotiation with the management of Preterm, the Boston-area branch of a chain of abortion and gynecological service clinics, about 40 counselors voted to strike. Five others left the clinic and 25 others (many part-time) are still going to work.

It was hardly a hasty decision. For over a year the counselors had attempted to negotiate with management. Frustrated, they decided late last year to approach a union, and became affiliated with 1189, the Hospital Workers Union. Preterm's male lawyer at first refused to deal with the "girls," as he called the counselors, and insisted on working only with Elliot Small, the union leader.

In what the feminist newspaper Sister Courage characterized as an attempt to further intimidate employees, Preterm filed a charge of unfair labor practice with the National Labor Relations Board, charging that the union was bargaining in bad faith.

The NLRB spent three months investigating the complaint, and in the end found that it was unsubstantiated. Among other things, the counselors are demanding job security, layoffs on seniority basis, sick pay, and holidays and vacations — hardly extreme demands. The negotiations, which had been sus-

pending during the NLRB investigations, began again in June of this year. But in July management abruptly walked out on the negotiations and did not resume until federal mediators stepped in. They ceased to negotiate once again when the strike began, but a meeting has been scheduled for this week.

IT IS IRONIC and sad that an



abortion clinic, ostensibly representing respect for the rights and dignity of women, should prove so indifferent to the rights of the women who work for it. Diane Richards, Preterm's director, has been quoted, in a piously feminist sentiment, as saying that "as a woman it is personally disappointing to me to contemplate the idea that labor unions, which for the most part are male-dominated organizations, are going to force us to admit we can't work out our problems together." It doesn't seem to "personally disappoint" her that female management is unwilling to provide basic job rights to its sister-employees. Nor has her aversion to "male-dominated organizations" prevented her from twice calling in police to arrest strikers.

I imagine that some of the readers of this column who are opposed to abortion will feel little sympathy for the striking counselors, feeling that they are

assisting in the "murder" of fetuses. But the role of the counselor is a complex one, and she is not necessarily an abortion advocate per se.

Abortion is not a pleasant alternative, for anyone. Of necessity, the pregnant woman makes her decision in relative haste, with no time to sort out her feelings about what she is about to do. The counselor can help her to sort out her feelings, and decide if abortion is really the solution she wants.

YET PRETERM HAS, according to Sister Courage, "speeded up" the counseling procedure, and this was done even before the strike. Since it's gone on, according to journalist Laura Shapiro, the speeding up process has intensified. Shapiro reports on a recent incident in which a woman, already counseled and about to be aborted, asked the nurse if they "were going to kill my baby." Obviously such a woman needed far more counseling than she got, and one wonders how many women, whose choice of abortion has not been a wise one for themselves, have gone through the operation without understanding its implications for them. But good counseling, however psychologically necessary to the patient, is not economically necessary to the clinic: it's the abortion they get paid for, not the counseling.

Throughout the strike and the two years of negotiation that preceded it, the counselors have been willing to compromise. "We are not frozen in any position," emphasizes union organizer Debbie Megrian. "We are trying to be flexible on every issue."